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The Legend of Zahhak: An Examination of Iranian Mythology and Its Impact on Modern Social Crisis

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Abstract

In contemporary Iranian society, the legend of Zahhak is a potent allegory for political and social challenges, resonating deeply with themes of oppression and resistance. Modern parallels are drawn to critique authoritarian regimes and underscore the necessity for moral integrity and justice. Zahhak's story also serves as a profound psychological and sociological case study, illustrating the corruptive nature of power and the dynamics of collective action against tyranny.

This paper explores the symbolic and cultural significance of Zahhak's legend, its impact on Iranian national identity, and its relevance to modern sociopolitical contexts. Through a detailed examination of the myth's origins, its narrative structure, and its allegorical implications, this study sheds light on how ancient mythology continues to influence contemporary cultural and ethical paradigms in Iran. The legend of Zahhak is not merely an ancient tale but a timeless narrative that highlights the enduring human struggle for righteousness and justice against the forces of evil.

Keywords: Zahhak (Zahak), Shahnameh, Avesta, Mythology

Introduction

The legend of Zahhak [Zahhāk or Zahāk (pronounced [zæhɒːk]) (Persian: ضحّاک)][1] is one of the most renowned mythological stories in Iran, with references found in the ancient text of the Avesta. This legend revolves around King Zahhak (also known as Aži Dahāka), who symbolizes evil and oppression. In the Avesta, Aži Dahāka is depicted as a dangerous and terrifying demon with three heads, six eyes, and three mouths, representing a primary enemy of creation and humanity (Boyce, 2001). Application of metaphorical narratives in hermeneutics have already been studied in our previous works (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024a,b) and they have been deemed both efficient and paradoxical to understand the everlasting spirit of Holy Scriptures. In this paper we try to study the legend of Zahhak in contemporary social crisis of Gaza-Palestine to analyze the crisis and obtain a holistic perspective of the crisis based on Iranian holy scriptures of Avesta and Shahnameh[2] .

Summary of Zahhak's Legend in the Avesta

Aži Dahāka, also known as Zahhak, is described as a demonic being created by Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) to combat good and truth. The legend recounts that Zahhak was a king with two serpents growing from his shoulders, which required the brains of two young men daily for sustenance. Through deceit and trickery, Zahhak rose to power and established a tyrannical rule characterized by oppression and the suffering of his people. Ultimately, a mythical hero named Fereydun challenged Zahhak, defeated him, and imprisoned him in Mount Damavand to prevent further harm to humanity (Kellens, 2013).

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zahhak

[2] Ferdowsi, Abolqasem. *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Translated by A. A. Beik, Princeton University Press, 1996.

This narrative illustrates the perpetual struggle between good and evil and the pursuit of justice in society. Zahhak symbolizes Ahriman and wickedness, while Fereydun represents righteousness and justice, becoming immortalized in the history and culture of Iran (Kellens, 2013).

The Allegory of Zahhak in Modern Iranian Society

The triumph of Fereydun over Zahhak in Avesta symbolism should theoretically have ended the disillusionment of Iranian youth. However, the Avesta never negates the possibility of Zahhak's rebirth, implying that until a true Fereydun emerges victorious, the disillusionment of Iranian youth persists due to ancient Iranian spells (Boyce, 2001).

Repeated Failures and Modern Struggles

Successful Iranian youth might be familiar with the concept of repeated failures, colloquially known as "bad luck." An example includes the life of Maryam Mirzakhani and the tragic bus accident involving students that led to her untimely death. The disrupted lives of many young Iranians, such as Ali Younesi and Amir Hossein Moradi, indicate that the natural progression of many young Iranians is disturbed (Ramazani, 2020). Naming these disruptions as spells and witchcraft would lead to a scientific deadlock. However, fundamentally, when falsehood and deceit dominate (whether through spells and bad luck or not), the wheels of civilization are hindered.

Zahhak as an International Phenomenon

This deceit is not exclusive to the ruling bodies, suggesting that Zahhak is not merely an Iranian character and enemy. Zahhak can symbolize the system of lies, politics, and deceit prevailing on an international level, a system that sacrifices children and women while hypocritically advocating for their rights. Yes, Zahhak is alive! And if the fight is not continued, he will continue to consume. There is no classic front to find Zahhak and, more broadly, Ahriman.

The Nature of Ahriman

Ahriman has a nature and destiny distinct from Ahura Mazda. Firstly, Ahriman's nature is not orderly, lacking a proper system and order. The greatest demon, deceit, when prevailing, turns the world upside down, making evil appear good and good appear evil (Boyce, 2001).

Secondly, Ahriman lacks a good nature, leading to destruction in the system of Iran. Thirdly, Ahriman is not a singular entity; some think Ahriman is a single, solitary identity. Ahriman is a composite identity, meaning thousands of identities with the same nature but different forms, where opposing them results in the same outcome (Boyce, 2001).

Zahhak in Iranian Mythology

Zahhak's Origins and Transformation

Zahhak's story begins with his birth and his subsequent transformation into a symbol of ultimate evil. Initially, Zahhak was a prince named Mardas, but he was seduced by Ahriman into committing patricide, thus beginning his descent into tyranny. Ahriman, pleased with Zahhak's willingness to embrace evil, rewarded him by growing two serpents on his shoulders. These serpents, which demanded human brains for sustenance, are symbolic of his insatiable greed and cruelty (Boyce, 2001).

Zahhak's Rule and Reign of Terror

During Zahhak's reign, he established a regime based on fear, oppression, and brutality. He usurped the throne from the benevolent king Jamshid and plunged the country into darkness. His reign was marked by mass executions and the daily sacrifice of young men to feed the serpents on his shoulders. The fear and suffering inflicted by Zahhak were so profound that they became deeply embedded in the cultural memory of the Iranian people (Boyce, 2001).

The Rise of Fereydun

The end of Zahhak's reign came with the rise of Fereydun, a young hero destined to overthrow the tyrant. Fereydun, with the support of

the people and guided by the divine favor of Ahura Mazda, mounted a rebellion against Zahhak. After a series of battles, Fereydun managed to capture Zahhak and imprison him in Mount Damavand, where, according to legend, he remains bound to this day, unable to harm humanity (Boyce, 2001).

Symbolism and Allegory in the Legend of Zahhak

The Eternal Struggle Between Good and Evil

The legend of Zahhak is a profound allegory of the eternal struggle between good and evil. Zahhak represents the destructive forces of greed, deception, and tyranny, while Fereydun embodies the principles of justice, truth, and righteousness. This dichotomy reflects the broader Zoroastrian cosmology, where the forces of Ahura Mazda (good) are in constant battle with those of Angra Mainyu (evil) (Boyce, 2001).

The Cultural and Historical Impact

The story of Zahhak has had a lasting impact on Iranian culture and history. It has been retold in various forms, from oral traditions to written literature, and has influenced Persian poetry, art, and folklore. The narrative serves as a moral lesson, emphasizing the importance of resistance against tyranny and the pursuit of justice. It also underscores the belief in the eventual triumph of good over evil, a central tenet of Zoroastrianism (Kellens, 2013).

Modern Interpretations and Relevance

Psychological and Sociological Perspectives

In modern times, the legend of Zahhak can be interpreted through psychological and sociological lenses. Psychologically, Zahhak's transformation from a prince to a tyrant can be seen as a representation of the corrupting influence of power and the psychological effects of guilt and fear. Sociologically, the story highlights the dynamics of power, authority, and resistance within a society, illustrating how tyranny can be challenged and overthrown by collective action and moral courage (Boyce, 2001).

Contemporary Parallels

The legend of Zahhak continues to resonate in contemporary Iranian society, particularly in the context of political and social struggles. The metaphor of Zahhak's tyranny is often used to critique oppressive regimes and highlight the need for justice and reform. The story serves as a reminder that the fight against tyranny and injustice is ongoing and that the principles of truth and righteousness must be upheld (Ramazani, 2020).

The Role of Mythology in Shaping National Identity

The Power of Myth

Mythology plays a crucial role in shaping national identity and cultural values. The legend of Zahhak is more than just a story; it is a cultural artifact that encapsulates the collective values, beliefs, and experiences of the Iranian people. It reinforces the cultural narrative of resistance against oppression and the enduring quest for justice and righteousness (Kellens, 2013).

Educational and Moral Lessons

The legend of Zahhak serves as an educational tool, imparting moral lessons to successive generations. It teaches the dangers of greed and tyranny, the importance of justice and truth, and the necessity of vigilance against the forces of evil. By embedding these values in the cultural consciousness, the story helps to shape the moral and ethical framework of society (Kellens, 2013).

Conclusion

The legend of Zahhak is a powerful and enduring myth that continues to shape the cultural and historical landscape of Iran. It represents the eternal struggle between good and evil, the corrupting influence of power, and the importance of resistance against tyranny. Through its rich symbolism and allegory, the story of Zahhak imparts valuable moral lessons and reinforces the cultural identity of the Iranian people. In modern times, the legend remains relevant, providing a lens through which contemporary social and political issues can be understood and addressed.

As Iranian society continues to evolve, the lessons of Zahhak's story remain pertinent, reminding us of the enduring importance of justice, truth, and moral courage in the face of oppression. The legend of Zahhak is not just a tale of ancient mythology but a timeless narrative that speaks to the universal human experience of the struggle for righteousness and the triumph of good over evil.

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